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Post-abyssal ethics in education research in settings of conflict and crisis: Stories from the field

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This article draws heavily on the post-abyssal philosophy of Boaventura de Sousa Santos in order to theorise new ways of thinking about research ethics in settings affected by armed conflict and crisis, and to put them into practice. Our article explores the dilemmas and tensions faced by four graduate students and a supervisor across diverse international settings. For some of us, these are places we call home, for others these are places that provide refuge to our people: Afghanistan, Jordan, Lebanon and India. We seek to deepen standard understandings of ethics as institutionalised in university forms, arguing that tidy checklists for safety and risk mitigation do not adequately address the complex affective and socio-political struggles permeating research, and the bodies of researchers, in these settings. Our main focus here is on how we can synthesise our various experiences in order to offer something of value to others who may be about to go into the field in settings affected by armed conflict and crisis. The question that we address, then, is: how can researchers avoid the limitations, obfuscations and silences of traditional institutional ethics in order to adopt a situated, embodied, post-abyssal research ethic that might open up new spaces for emotion, encounter, and engagement with struggle, risk and voicing? We use an autoethnographic approach that enables congruence with the aims of this article, and that supports our aspirations for enhanced impact through powerful narrative. We end with discussion that contains suggestions for institutions, supervisors, researchers, and for funding and professional bodies.

Keywords: research ethics; research approaches; post-abyssal research; education in emergencies; autho-ethnography; education for peace-building

Introduction

This article draws heavily on the post-abyssal philosophy of de Sousa Santos (2018) in order to theorise new ways of thinking about research ethics in settings affected by armed conflict and crisis, and put them into practice. Our article explores the moral dilemmas and tensions faced by four graduate students and a supervisor across diverse international settings. For some of us, these are places we call home; for

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others, they are places that provide refuge to our people: Afghanistan, Jordan, Lebanon and India. We seek to provoke, complicate and deepen standard understandings of ethics as institutionalised in university forms, arguing that tidy checklists for safety and risk mitigation do not adequately address the complex affective and socio-political struggles permeating research, and the bodies of researchers, in these settings. Our main focus here is on how we can synthesise our various experiences in order to offer something of value to others who may be about to go into the field in settings affected by armed conflict and crisis. The question that we address then is: *How can researchers avoid the limitations, obfuscations and silences of traditional institutional ethics in order to adopt a situated, embodied, post-abyssal research ethic that might open up new spaces for emotion, encounter and engagement with struggle, risk and voicing?*

We wish to note from the outset that our shared university affiliation does not imply that we are referring to any one institution in particular. We begin with a brief overview of the origins of contemporary risk and ethics concerns. We question the extent to which institutional guidelines have engaged with the challenges of research in humanitarian and emergency settings—settings where resources are scarce, instability and insecurity are the norm, and threats to physical and emotional well-being abound. Autoethnographic journaling becomes our source of data as we present five journal entries that illuminate the embodied and emotional weight of such fieldwork. We analyse this data twice. Once through the emergence of a set of themes that are informed by de Sousa Santos, and once through the lens of de Sousa Santos's post-abyssal philosophy more generally. We have labelled our themes as different kinds of researcher, and we discuss these researcher types in the light of post-abyssal thinking. We end by proposing stimulus questions for researchers attempting to develop ethical practices in settings of conflict and crisis, and by making some recommendations in the hope of stimulating further discussion.

Ethics and risk in education research

The origins of concerns about ethics in education generally can be traced to historically dehumanising research in the social and natural sciences in the UK and other parts of the world[1] (Kitchener & Kitchener, 2013). In 1974, the British Educational Research Association (BERA) was established in the UK for the advancement of research in education, and it has placed research ethics at the forefront of its activities from the start.[2] While BERA's guidelines remain applicable and relevant, educational research in settings characterised by armed conflict, heightened vulnerability, extreme conditions, resource scarcity, instability and insecurity present particular challenges (Hart & Tyrer, 2006; Berman *et al.,* 2016). Educational agencies and researchers operating in these settings have responded by drawing on global codes, standards and frameworks that have articulated the case for protecting civilians in humanitarian planning and practice.[3] The Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE, 2010) has also worked on these issues. In effect, however, there is a paucity of knowledge on how to define and understand ethics in education research in emergency contexts (Maglio & Pherali, 2020).

Thus, whilst risk and ethics checklists that aim for consistency may act as useful tools in settings of conflict and crisis, they can also lead to box-ticking exercises rather

than to deeper reflection. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to this as 'procedural ethics'. In contrast, 'ethics in practice' responds to the day-to-day ethical challenges that arise during research. For example, ethical protocols such as the BERA guidelines may violate the norms and perspectives of communities being researched (Shamim & Qureshi, 2010). These dilemmas reveal the need to move towards better understanding of contextualised ethics in practice.

This is particularly important where procedural ethics and ethics in practice may be far apart. Hugman *et al.,* (2011) point out, for example, that the notion of 'informed consent' is enacted through layers of power, fear and desperation in contexts of displacement and emergencies. The researcher's aspiration to gain consent is blurred by whether consent can be truly given by a participant who lives within unstable political and financial circumstances. Does the participant, for example, feel compelled to contribute to the research to avoid the dissatisfaction of a powerful gatekeeper at a camp setting? Are they hopeful that consent may allow for assistance such as food? Thus, the well-intended but narrow nature of procedural ethics may neglect the power relations, language and cultural sensitivities, and the hardships that exist within emergency settings. Researchers in these contexts may also need to respond to unforeseen, real-time and ethically challenging situations, which Guillemin and Gillam (2004) refer to as 'ethically important moments' (p. 276).

To a certain extent, the important work to deepen understanding of situated ethics in settings of conflict and crisis has already begun.[4] In this article, we go further through linking some of our experiences of education research in settings of conflict and crisis with post-abyssal ethics. We employ a broader framework and share some critical moments from all stages of the research process.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos: epistemologies of the South

de Sousa Santos (2018) supports us to consider a postcolonial (or as he would say, post-abyssal) lens in this endeavour. This takes into account our obligations towards the epistemologies of the South, and the avoidance of epistemicide (the wiping out of alternative epistemologies). For de Sousa Santos, there is an abyssal line that divides the epistemologies of the global North from those of the global South. As he says, the Eurocentric epistemological North conceives itself as:

> The only source of valid knowledge, no matter where, in geographic terms, that knowledge is produced. By the same token, the South, that is, whatever lies on the other side of the line, is the realm of ignorance. The South is the problem; the North is the solution. On these terms, the only valid understanding of the world is the Western understanding of the world. (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 6)

The epistemological North reproduces capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy, and views knowledge through a utilitarian, and often monetised, lens. The other side of the abyssal line, however, is characterised by struggle, and is a place where people are prevented from representing the world as their own, in their own terms. de Sousa Santos calls for researchers to participate in the struggles of the global South and to face risks, as they do. de Sousa Santos's call unsettles traditional assumptions of neutrality in methodological guides. Once we cross the abyssal line

and encounter severe inequality and crisis, de Sousa Santos argues that 'neutrality makes no sense' because 'the criterion for trust lies in the vicissitudes of the struggle against oppression, thus immediately precluding any contextual indifference' (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 44).

Using autoethnographic journaling for researching ethics and risk

Drawing on Ellis and Bochner (2000), and on our own previous research (Cremin, 2018; Aryoubi, 2020; Salem, 2020), we use here an autoethnographic approach to investigate and share the wider ethical issues that we have faced in settings of conflict and crisis. This article generates its own 'data' through autoethnographic journaling, and this forms the basis of our analysis and discussion. Each of the pieces of autoethnographic journaling is linked to a doctoral research project, but these projects are not the focus of the article in hand. Findings from these have been published elsewhere (e.g. Kurian, 2020, Salem, 2021). Unfortunately, there is not the space here to provide an overview of the data and analysis that was used in these studies.

Autoethnography is an ideal vehicle for the study in hand. In essence, we use autoethnography here because of what it affords us in terms of congruence, embodiment and impact. In this we go beyond mere reflexivity in order to embrace what is possible when we stand in the space between autobiography and ethnography. Autoethnography is congruent because it enables researchers to replicate in their methodology what they aspire towards in their research, through the fact that it is emancipatory and generates horizontal relationships with participants and readers. It allows researchers to draw on personal experience, and not only on the experiences of others, thus avoiding 'othering' through one-sided observation (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Autoethnography also allows researchers to reclaim the body, and to express passion and spirit. It enables positionality and subjectivity, and grounds itself in time and space in ways that avoid 'speaking from a disembodied head' (Spry, 2006, p. 193). It seems to us particularly important that research in settings of conflict and crisis pays attention to the bodies of researchers and research participants who face physical challenges and danger as part of everyday existence. Finally, impact: this comes as much from the genres and methods that are used for sharing research findings as it does from the findings themselves (Atkinson *et al.*, 2003).

We have thus chosen autoethnography for its aesthetic, as well as its pragmatic appeal. We expose our own vulnerability so that readers will perhaps be encouraged to do the same. More specifically, we have developed autoethnographic journaling as our method. This involves the following four criteria:

- It begins with '*I am sitting*', grounding the study both in a continuous present and in a particular place and time.
- It shares a memory of a critical moment or event that captures the essence of a particular period of time.
- It reflects on wider issues, theories and literatures.
- It is written in an embodied and evocative style and integrates emotion and personal experience with cognition.

The autoethnographic journal entries

We have written, then, five autoethnographic journal entries that we share here.

Hilary

I am sitting at my family dinner table in the UK in the period after Christmas. I want Hogai to be safe. I am surrounded by people I love, but my mind is with another family many miles away in Kabul. Though sharing this moment in time, we are separated by culture and tradition, and by an abyssal line. In Kabul it is not Christmas. In Kabul it is not safe.[5]

Here, the bangs and explosions are from corks and fireworks, there they are from bombs, our bombs, that end lives. Here people are crying out in joy and gratitude, there they are crying out in pain and loss. I am here, and Hogai is there at her grandfather's house.

She is there because we gave her permission to go. I gave her permission to go. The form has my signature on it. I remember the look my colleague gave me as I signed. The last bomb that I know about fell 500 metres from her home. People died. I want Hogai to be safe.

Before the bombs Hogai and I were laughing across a dodgy mobile phone line. No Hogai!, you said you would avoid public spaces. How can I unsee the picture of you on Facebook in the market grinning with your cousin? Your online journal is full of reflections on the colours, sounds, smells, textures, delights and tragedies of this country that is your birthright. But you are sharing with me through your journal how you are sometimes avoiding the restrictions that we placed upon you. I don't want to know! Of course, of course you must follow your desires. You don't belong to me, or to my institution. You are part of the family that you have not met in person since you were 2 days old, beginning the long trek across Europe to safety. You are at home. I want you to be at home. I am glad. I want you to be safe. It's not up to me.

I have no right to feel anything at all—first world problems! But I do feel. What do I do with the love that I feel for my students? Am I supposed to love them? Am I supposed to be thinking of them at Christmas time? Am I supposed to be capable of taking the same risks that they take? I am their supervisor and yet I am as clueless as a child when it comes to navigating the everyday risks that are part of their landscape, part of their home lives. For better or worse, we navigate this tricky space together.

Hogai[6]

I am sitting in a car on my way to the airport after I informed my supervisor that there was an emergency during my fieldwork. I was able to stay in Kabul for fieldwork through over nine major attacks, but the last one on 27 January 2018 was much too close to where I was staying. It was incredibly difficult to get into Kabul, but only took a minute's notice for me to get out.

Going 'home' to the city of my birth was difficult. I don't mean just emotionally, but literally difficult due to the faculty fieldwork policies. It didn't matter where I was born, or what family I had in Kabul. All that mattered was the colour code of the

country of my birth on the UK travel advice website.[7] The Foreign Office's traffic light red filled the map of Afghanistan, except for a part of Kabul that was orange, which meant there was moderate risk. Lucky for me, that was where I wanted to conduct my fieldwork and where my grandfather lived.

I submitted an extended 13-page risk assessment. I was asked to revise and resubmit the form several times. After all the revisions, the faculty still seemed unsure, and the university decided to consult with an outside risk management company to ensure an even more 'robust risk assessment'. After several more revisions, I was allowed to go. Much of the permission was possible due to my local language abilities, family relations and living arrangements in Afghanistan. Still, I can't help but resent that they had the power to decide whether I was allowed to go 'home' to Kabul for fieldwork.

I felt safe in Kabul because I trusted the locals, and most of all my grandfather. It was the first time I got to meet him as an adult and we spent more time together during my fieldwork than anytime before. He repeatedly told me that his only concern was my safety. Of the nine violent attacks in Afghanistan during this time, the most shattering was the January 27 suicide attacks that killed 103 and injured 235 people in the city centre. Sensing worse to come, my grandfather immediately pushed me to pack my things. I changed my flight tickets and boarded the only flight out of Kabul for the day.

I am leaving whilst it feels like the city is crumbling. I am leaving everyone, including my grandfather, behind. I want to take him with me despite his refusal. However, I also know that even if he did want to go, he wouldn't be allowed because he doesn't have a visa. I know that I am going to feel anger and guilt about being able to leave in an instant, and that I will constantly think about my grandfather's welfare. I will call him every day to check in on him. It will be as if my fieldwork will never end. I wonder whether the ethics committee ever considers our family members as well in emergency settings, because my grandfather is an extension of me as I am of him.

Nomi[8]

I am sitting on my window-ledge in Mumbai, struggling to write a paper.

My first piece of research was at an Indian school practicing an ethic of care. I was nervous, not even certain how to work my audio-recorder, but excited. I loved the Dalai Lama's philosophy of compassion. I felt so lucky to be able to blend those spiritual ideals with my academic assignment. I thought my findings were meant to weave peace and care into a smooth tapestry.

However, the paper I'm writing now is not smooth. It's awfully messy. Stories of frustration. Stories of perplexity. Stories where nobody is rescued or brought to justice. People abandoned, mistreated. . . uncared for. I wonder if there's any hope in this uncertainty?

When I stepped into the school, the posters on the walls made me smile. 'There is only love.' 'Every child is special.' The principal kept her door wide open. As I sat with her to introduce myself, I watched child after child troop in to share some little joy or secret with her. *This is a dream school*, I thought.

And so it was. But it also experienced the challenges of practicing care against broader structures of oppression in society. I learned about Maya, an 8-year-old girl who worked as a maid in a student's home and was slapped for 'stealing' food. I learned about Rukmini, a woman harmed behind closed doors. I listened to 11-year-olds, Matthew, Mikhail and Rajesh, tell me they didn't need the kindness the school offered because their previous schools had taught them that they needed to be beaten and frightened in order to get better grades. I began to see the difficulties of practicing care in a deeply unequal world.

As I try to finish my paper now, I remember how I felt just as helpless as did my participant-teachers when they tried to solve complex problems without any trusty infrastructure of social workers, doctors and police to help them. I'm devastated that I couldn't help the people haunting my stories. When they spoke to me, I felt fettered as the 'objective, neutral interviewer' who was only allowed to say things like 'I see', 'That's interesting' and 'Tell me more'. My university ethics forms didn't foresee these struggles.

I start to write. Voices from the field spill onto the page: loving, sad, earnest, brave. The stories take on a life of their own and decide for themselves where the paper needs to go: into the shadowy corners of care-work and the tumultuous tug-of-war between structure and agency. The Dalai Lama says that compassion is the radicalism of our time. Perhaps this means that care matters, even when it can't help but stumble. Perhaps this means we have to remember the courage and light of the communities we work with, and see if possibility lurks in the cracks of our moral dilemmas. This critical hope might be difficult, but it's more than an ethics form.

Hiba[9]

I'm sitting on the wooden floor of a colour-crazed, eccentric Airbnb flat. The bareness of the room is starkly lonesome; the marks of my presence now diminished and packed. With the distractions of packing gone, I look over at the stacks of diaries spread thickly over the floor and begin to acknowledge the wave of emotions that are about to surge.

I have spent only 3 months with these 80 students, and yet their names which I am about to purposefully change and anonymise, their faces, voices and stories, feel etched into my mind and memory. I grab the diaries and realise that right now, just hours before my flight back to the UK, is the first time I can acknowledge the confusion and heartache that I experienced during this fieldwork. I think about my time with the students and the conversations that left me grappling with my sense of identity as a researcher and an individual.

My pursuit of this Ph.D. was itself created by a devastating war. I left Syria after witnessing the loss of many of its children and, 3 years later, I had arrived in Jordan to research Syrian refugee students' experiences in the hope of sharing their stories. My own journey was perplexing; alongside my serene and privileged academic space, I was living through states of distress for my family's safety (who still resided back home) through the ebbs and shocks of violence. I spent a year preparing for this visit, following ethical procedures to do research without harm. Now, I am left haunted by unanswered dilemmas.

'How were you able to leave Syria?', 'Can you take us with you?', 'What's it like to study abroad as a female?'. There were many conversations that separated and merged the line—the code of ethics—between students and myself. We spoke of famous shops in Syria, feelings about the news and the meaning of home. I felt moved by the connection we have, but guilty for how our life experiences ultimately divided us. There were paralysing moments that required my immediate response—their admissions of suicidal thoughts, fears about their futures, cases of harassment and pleads for leaving for Europe too. That they had asked me to return, telling me that I had been the only one to speak to them kindly in nearly 5 years. I wondered how unethical this goodbye was.

Nearly 100 letters surround me on the floor, thanking me for showing kindness, asking me to help them be seen by others. I recall our goodbyes on the final day and the guilt I felt of being able to travel with my Syrian passport amidst a nation filled with refugees who dreamt of such freedom. I wonder how I could possibly share their realities, individualities and pain.

I pack the diaries and decide that I am not ready to read them all. Not today. I recognise my role as a researcher, but I decide that, for tonight, I am just a heartbroken Syrian.

Basma[10]

I am sitting reading a reviewer's feedback on research I submitted for publication. The reviewer found my emphasis on the 'resilience' of Syrian youth problematic. They criticised the 'toxicity' of resilience work in conflict contexts and recommended I focus instead on the 'agency of youth to address structures of violence'.

Thinking of what propelled me to explore the 'resilience' of Syrian youth, I reflect back on previous research I conducted with Syrian children in a school in Lebanon. During my data collection, I heard about a thorny set of travails that permeated their educational experiences. These were compounded with heart-warming accounts of excellence and perseverance. I learnt about some Syrian students snatching out top ranks and outperforming their Lebanese peers. Some others coped with languages of instruction they were ill-prepared for. I listened to children advocating for creating a school culture of love and care. I marvelled at their cheerful smiles that prevailed despite their disheartening conditions.

Syrian children's struggles and perseverance spoke forcibly to my own lived experience. Stories I heard conjured up images of my family's two houses that had been reduced to rubble. They restored memories of severe siege and enforced displacement that I survived. In their innocent faces, I saw the smiles of five of my own young students who lost their lives in the war. They awakened ineffable feelings I experienced following the loss of Walaa, Wedian, Mohammed, Laila and Bara'a; feelings of disorientation and paralysing disinterest in a ruthlessly unjust world. Looking back at the chaotic reality I survived, I sometimes wonder how I managed to plunge into applying for universities in the UK, travel frequently to Lebanon to take international English tests and attend scholarship and visa interviews. I have no clear recollection of the myriad of obstacles I encountered before I made it to Cambridge, completed my Master's and continued to pursue a Ph.D. when my parents and friends are still in

Syria. I ponder how these experiences have provided me with an internalised empowering framework in a world of volatile and turbulent change.

The findings of my research, coupled with my own personal experience, disclose a story of injustice and resilience. Our resilience is precious because it is born of our intensely lived struggles. At a time when Syrian blood is put at the disposal of local, regional and global powers, resilience is our everyday form of resistance. Our resilience is 'agency' in the strong sense of the word. Why then not relinquish 'resilience' and use 'agency'? Why does this make me uncomfortable?

I contemplate the broad and deeply problematic ethical and political dimension of 'agency' in this context. 'Do I want to approach our lived experiences in such a shallow framework?', 'Do I want to participate in scapegoating my people?'. I pause. I think. I hesitate but then press 'reject revisions'. My research will not be published but my hope for an ethical and cognitively just future for academia will remain alive.

Discussion

These autoethnographic pieces, then, provide us with data that we have analysed in two ways in order to tease out concepts and ideas that can inform our research question here. Turning first to our thematic analysis, we discuss the types of researcher that emerged from our analysis of the autoethnographic journal entries when we took post-abyssal thinking into account.

The embodied, experiencing, feeling researcher

All autoethnographic journal pieces here reveal a complex array of feelings that range from deep sadness, to outrage, to inspiration. This certainly belies the notion of the rational objective researcher. Some of these feelings come from being in the field, some from resonances with prior experiences, and some from the disjuncture between university culture and that of our settings. The feelings are not mild—they encompass shock, heartache, anxiety, torment, tears, helplessness, devastation, cluelessness, disorientation and prayer. The dangers also are not imagined—they include threats to life and limb, as well as to mental health and well-being. There is a deep sense that we as researchers are embodied, and that our bodies are at risk. There is also, however, a strong awareness that our emotions are fundamental to ways of knowing and understanding the field, as well as to forming and sustaining relationships of love, care and compassion.

Guilt features large in these accounts. There is a good deal of guilt and sadness about those left behind, whether they are loved ones or research participants. There is also the guilt of an enabling supervisor. How do we better prepare novice researchers and their supervisors for the emotional labour involved in engaging with the lived realities of direct and indirect violence, much of it complex and deeply embedded within local, national and global systems? Institutional ethics and risk assessment forms seem unable to engage meaningfully with this *a priori*, and we are left wondering what kinds of games researchers, administrators and academics play in order to enable this research to continue.

The ineffective researcher

The autoethnographic journal entries also reveal how researchers in settings of conflict and crisis often feel powerless in the face of forces that feel so much bigger than they are. It can feel as if institutions are blind to the lived realities of researchers on the ground, who see the impact of conflict and violence only too well but feel unable to act. This is particularly hard when the people most affected are family members or friends (often the case because of the need to gain access to the field). Hogai's piece reflects on the consequences for her of leaving the field. Her ability to access her privilege, long won by those members of her family who were able to get away when she was a child, is at odds with other members of her family who were left behind. This reflects de Sousa Santos's (2018) call for renewed focus on the 'inter-subjective' experience which valorises care and prioritises relationships over objective indifference and blindness.

Although Hogai's university's consideration for her physical safety was clear, this did not of course extend to her inter-subjective experiences with family and research participants. We are left wondering what a post-abyssal ethical response might be. When does the responsibility for ethical care of research participants end? Ultimately, Hogai's writing questions the responsibility that institutions have for those who are involved in the wider research process, especially if they are in a vulnerable position within an emergency setting. It also questions the responsibilities of supervisors and institutions in managing the effects of trauma and psychological distress on all researchers, but especially novice researchers. In this particular case, a strong ethic of care, already established between supervisor and supervisee, and the capacity to spend weeks capturing emotion in writing, were transformative. We know from experience, however, that this is not always made possible or considered necessary.

The researcher cut adrift

We use the words 'cut adrift' to conjure up the image of ships drifting away from the shore; lost and far from safe, sure ground. Nomisha's piece shows the dilemmas that arise from 'bearing witness to something just because you happened to be present' (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 157). It names different forms of violence her participant-school faced in a setting where there was no ready source of help. As a researcher at the school, she too was pulled into their struggle. If people encountered in research face threats to their emotional or physical well-being, it is considered ethical to try and refer them to established institutional support systems (Patton, 2014). However, this assumption might not reflect the economic, political and geo-historical realities of participants in under-resourced Southern settings without reliable support systems. For example, the World Health Organization has noted that public funding for mental health workers (including social workers, counsellors and child psychiatrists) is 'very meagre' in low and middle-income countries (WHO, 2018, p. 2). The ratio of mental health workers to every 100,000 people in a population can be as low as <1 in low-income countries (compared to 72 in high-income countries) (WHO, 2018). In many of these countries, it has been noted that the police might not be considered legitimate or trustworthy sources of justice or authority due to bribery, corruption,

political pressures, brutality, harassment and ill-treatment of marginalised or vulnerable community members in particular (K'nIfe & Haughton, 2013). This macro-trend was evident at the micro-level of Nomisha's fieldwork. Even though she had familiarised herself with local ethical guidelines (e.g. Srivastava, 2020), she discovered that local justice systems (along with social welfare and mental health professionals) were not seen as viable sources of support.

Given that fieldwork in settings of crisis, conflict or high inequality might mean being 'cut adrift' from the Eurocentric assumptions we employ in our home universities, we turn once more to de Sousa Santos (2018, p. 157), who reminds us that the post-abyssal researcher must confront the 'risks endangering the oppressed social groups and their struggles against oppression' as part of 'knowing-with' participants in their economic, political and geo-historical contexts.

The researcher in solidarity

As qualitative researchers, we become witnesses to other worlds, others' realities and others' communities. This article's autoethnographic pieces reveal the hardships and injustices that abound in the contexts we set out to explore, and the emotions and questions that we experienced as a result. All authors of this article have pursued research that is inspired by their connection to the research subject, a factor that is not uncommon. Hiba's piece draws on how this connection guides her research. It embraces the intersubjectivity that is central to knowledge-making, or as de Sousa Santos (2018) notes, is always present despite arguments for 'objectivity'. The contribution reflects the importance of engaging with the researcher's emotions, experiences and sense of relatedness as driving factors to ensure that research is framed through an ethics of care at every stage.[11]

While care for participants in institutional guidelines is seen through a focus on confidentiality, anonymity, protection and caution for the researcher's positionality as a driver of change, de Sousa Santos's (2018) post-abyssal thinking advocates for an emphasis on caring relationships instead, turning away from indifference and objectivity. This approach sees care as listening, understanding and standing in solidarity. For example, the participants of Hiba's research did not see the importance of confidentiality but instead asked to be seen, to be heard and for their names to be remembered—their names which were often replaced by those around them with the word 'refugee'. The importance of these spaces is rooted in ensuring that the research continuously seeks to inspire effective engagement with participants' experiences and worlds. How can the experiences of these children be shared transparently and genuinely? How can experiences be seen and felt by others, in the hope of inspiring further research and change? Post-abyssal ethics permeates across all cycles of research, from the inception of research questions to its dissemination. As argued by Robinson-Pant and Singal (2016), effective dissemination is integral to research and is one of the researcher's key responsibilities.

Leaving the field behind, one of Hiba's participants stated that she was thankful for the project and she echoed the importance of student voice, asking the rest of the world to: 'try to speak to us and help us, not through money, but through your feelings towards us. Talk to us. That can help us feel hopeful about our lives'. While

fieldwork may entail complex and testing experiences and feelings for the researcher, as shown in Hiba's piece, there is value in being moved by the communities spoken to, and investing these emotions in seeking to move others.

The tongue-tied researcher

These autoethnographic writings also expose some epistemological nuances and complexities that are rarely, if ever, captured by conventional institutional ethics. Basma's piece provides an example that testifies to the significance of de Sousa Santos's (2018) calls for valorising epistemologies of the South, knowledges that emerge from social and political struggle. The reviewer's critique of Basma's research fails to capture the nuanced, complex and intrinsically contextualised nature of 'resilience' in the Syrian context. Instead of affording the author the opportunity to validate knowledge anchored in the experiences of struggling social groups, the feedback of the reviewer manifests a Eurocentric bias of knowledge and a form of cognitive injustice (de Sousa Santos, 2018).

According to de Sousa Santos, the validity of the epistemologies of the South not only lies in the recognition of the struggle, but also in the recognition of the protagonists themselves and their preferred tools of communication—such as conceptual constructs, methodologies and pedagogies. Basma's piece yields an example of how two different conceptual constructs have the capacity not only to portray the struggle differently, but also to redefine its protagonists. 'Agency' puts the pressure and responsibility of social transformation on individuals trapped in conflict. But how realistic is it to expect that Syrian individuals might possess the 'agency' to tackle the structures and conditions that sustain and perpetuate the Syrian war? Shouldn't questions about the responsibility of Syrian youth to tackle the structures of instability in their country be reframed as questions of how to avoid 'the projection of responsibility onto the oppressed alone' (Hajir & Kester, 2020, p. 8). Are not critiques of resilience-based research guilty of concealing that conflicted societies are mostly victims of the devastation unleashed by global capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy? (See Hajir *et al.*, 2021 for a comprehensive analysis of the ethical stakes of dismissing resilience research.)

Post-abyssal possibilities

Turning next to our analysis based on post-abyssal philosophy, we note that the ultimate purpose of post-abyssal research is to make researchers accountable to the people they are working with, rather than to a set of guidelines provided by their institutions (de Sousa Santos, 2018). Thus, four tenets of post-abyssal ethics can be put forward. First, post-abyssal ethics interrogates Eurocentric, modernist and overly cognate ideologies that often put researchers and organisations at the peril of exoticising participants' experiences and struggles. Second, they simultaneously acknowledge that researchers are not completely adrift in an unrestrained subjectivity. de Sousa Santos (2018) advocates for questioning the subjective–objective divide and focusing instead on the 'inter-subjective'. To practically achieve this, they valorise the notion of care and prioritise relationships over objective blindness and indifference. Third,

researchers are also encouraged to reject frameworks that present themselves as apolitical (whilst being inherently political), and to approach participants' experiences as both contingent and reversible, not at all inevitable. Thus, researchers connect the local to the global, and the lives of individuals to their economic, political and geo-historical contexts. Fourth, post-abyssal ethics sees all cycles of research as inherently related. It suggests that an over-focus on fieldwork and the stage of data collection only neglects the fact that ethical concerns arise much earlier and continue to manifest throughout the research, dissemination and publication lifecycle.

Conclusion: towards post-abyssal ethics

This article exposes a disjunction between the institutional nature of research ethics and the complex realities of research in settings of conflict and crisis. Our autoethnographic pieces contain examples of de Sousa Santos's (2018) 'abyssal thinking' that renders 'non-existent, irrelevant, or unintelligible all that exists on the other side of the abyssal line' (p. 84). In conclusion, we argue that institutional ethics need to engage urgently with post-abyssal ethics, especially in settings of conflict and crisis.

Thus, we end with a series of questions that we hope will stimulate wider discussion and provide support to researchers as they enter the research process. They draw on the need to: take proper account of emotion in the research process—both positive and negative, self and other; support researchers and research supervisors to consider the effects of risk, risk-management and withdrawal on bodies and hearts, including their own; embrace situated and co-developed protocols for ethics and risk; be mindful of the (sometimes incommensurate) ways that these relate to institutional protocols and how to engage with these tensions; consider how researcher positionality has a visceral impact on the research process and relations in the field; keep the research agenda flexible and open so that dissemination and processes of generating impact can be co-developed with participants; ensure that theoretical, historical and contextual perspectives are drawn from Southern epistemologies that prioritise struggle, solidarity and risk, and that perspectives do not privilege Eurocentric or colonising agendas; avoid leaving researchers and research supervisors to make difficult decisions alone in the field (thus offsetting risk onto their bodies); and provide proper institutional support as researchers make decisions about ethics and risk throughout the research process. We ask:

- How do we find research and collaborators who excite, intrigue and inspire us?
- How do we choose theories and methodologies that empower those we meet, and that seek to understand and represent their worlds in ways that make sense to both them and us?
- How do we ensure that roles and expectations are clear from the outset, both our own, those of our institutions and those in the field?
- How do we decide what level of risk is acceptable, to ourselves and our institutions, and how to show care and solidarity to those we meet in the field? In what ways can/should we share these risks?
- How do we prepare ourselves to be unsettled by the struggles we witness? What should we do with the love, care and compassion for those we meet?

- How do we identify who we can and can't refer to for guidance and safeguarding? What should we do when there is no one?
- How do we fairly capture what we witness? How can we draw on experiences, emotions and reflections and use these to represent individuals fairly, sharing voices and stories, honouring struggle, validating knowledge and negotiating methods of impact?
- How do we acknowledge complicity within historic and current power structures that might benefit us, and harm those we meet? How do we communicate about this and ensure transparency?
- How do we allow ourselves to be transformed by the struggles that we have become part of, and how do we assimilate new knowledge and epistemologies?
- How can we balance our need to develop our careers, academic outputs, future funding opportunities and reputations with our need to stand in solidarity with those we have met?
- How do we manage the responses of others who prefer not to be unsettled by our work, or to engage in dialogue for meaningful change? How do we manage rejection and hostility?

We have framed the above as questions to invite ongoing conversations with our readers, and hopefully future authors in this journal and others. We hope that they will form a kind of provocation. They might even form the basis of an enhanced risk/ethical review process. We really do not have the answers (and our small study is not sufficiently extensive for this, even if ready answers were to be found), but we can offer the following insights based on lessons learned from our experiences. We present these through some recommendations for institutions, supervisors, researchers, funding and professional bodies.

Institutions can respond to the need to take proper account of emotion in the research process, and the effects of risk, ethics, risk management and withdrawal on the bodies and hearts of researchers and research supervisors through enhanced professional development, mentorship and/or arenas for peer support, well-being and exchange. They must avoid a legalistic mindset, which survives on the idea that it is best 'not to know', and to leave difficult decisions for people to make behind closed doors (whilst they as institutions benefit from the research outputs that result from this). They could also amend their protocols to leave more room for review of ethics and risk throughout the research process, so that researchers and research supervisors can access institutional support for difficult decisions, rather than being left to do this alone. Ethics and risk form-filling that takes place before researchers are 'allowed' to go into the field often descend into a kind of performativity that obscures the need for a far more messy and contingent process.

It is also important for institutions to ensure that research classes for graduate students include sessions on emotion, situated ethics and positionality. The curriculum for these classes, like the curriculum for so many higher education classes, needs to be decolonised in order to draw more fully on the epistemologies of the South, and to consider what this means in real terms for research design and practice. In particular, the need to engage with struggle, and to share the risks and benefits of research with participants, is worthy of careful consideration.

Supervisors need to be reflexive about what they can offer and the quality of relationships that they promote. This includes relationships between themselves and their students, and relationships between the students that they supervise, or members of a wider research group. It might be as helpful for potential applicants to know what supervision is like with a particular supervisor as it is to know their expertise in a particular field. Supervisors could be more upfront about this, perhaps giving information on their staff webpages about what they feel passionate about, their preferred ways of working and the levels of practical/emotional/professional support they and their research groups offer to supervisees.

Researchers, including research students, need to choose their project and their supervisor carefully, and to consider how they will work with their supervisor when it comes to both the joys and the pains of carrying out a research project (this includes the inevitable pain of realising that the original aims and aspirations of most research is ultimately unattainable). They need to be open to the epistemologies of the South, and to post-colonial perspectives, as they select the theoretical and practical tools they will use for research. They need to be aware of the ongoing struggles that they will face as they attempt to mediate between their own professional needs, the needs of their institution (including their supervisor and funders) and the needs of their participants. Knowing how, when and where to have difficult conversations will be a key skill. Knowing where to look for localised and contextualised protocols for ethics and risk, and how to put these in conversation with institutional ethics, is another.

An additional skill will be the ability to ensure multiple outputs from a research project that are guided by all concerned, including unanticipated outputs requested by participants. Allocating time and resources to this will be a test of the horizontal relationships that many claim but are not able/willing to sustain. Ultimately, post-abyssal researchers will need to make difficult decisions about where priorities lie. Sometimes prioritising the needs of participants and others in the field will mean restricting opportunities for career development and acclaim, and shouldering some of the burden of living with the kinds of injustices that they as researchers set out to tackle. Sometimes, prioritising the needs of others in their research group might involve considerable emotional labour.

Finally, funders and professional and research bodies such as BERA could do more to enable open-ended research agendas that allow for emergent needs to be responded to in the field. It is of course a myth that research can be designed, executed and written up in predictable ways before the research has even started, but it is often a requirement for researchers to act as if this were the case in order to draw down funds, or to be given the all-clear to do the research in the first place.

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Author contributions

All authors of this article contributed equally. After the lead author, all others are listed alphabetically.

Ethics

This article draws on studies that all gained approval from the University of Cambridge Ethics Approval process. No new data were generated for this article. Fieldnotes were re-presented as autoethnographic journaling.

NOTES

[1] Lanzarotta (2020) for example reveals how in the USA, in the 1950s, Native Alaskans were given radioactive isotopes of iodine-131, without their consent or knowledge, in order to help develop the American military.

[2] There were two symposia on ethics in the 1980 BERA conference, a 1996 publication on a code of ethics for educational research and, more recently, there was a 2014 seminar on technology and ethics. The BERA ethics guidelines document, which is continuously updated, is now in its fourth edition. It is widely used and highly regarded.

[3] A few examples of widely influential pieces of guidance in this area are: IASC (2012) *Commitments to accountability to affected populations*, Inter-Agency Standing Committee; UNICEF (2015) *Procedure for ethical standards in research, evaluation, data collection and analysis* (No. CF/PD/DRP/2015-001); GEC (2016) *Guide to education in emergencies*, Global Education Cluster; IRCR (2015) *The fundamental principles of the international Red Cross and Red Crescent movement: Ethics and tools for humanitarian action*, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

[4] For example, Maillet *et al.*, (2017) explore the complexity of 'methodological decision-making amid asymmetrical power relations' (p. 928) and examine the different facets of vulnerability and power that both researchers and participants might enjoy and enact during data collection. Similarly, Dempsey (2018) focuses on research with migrants in asylum camps in Europe, highlighting how research methodologies and researchers' reflection on their positionality might help to reveal how power is constituted in the research process. Nast (1994) explores other facets of identity, such as gender.

[5] I feel a certain discomfort in presenting these two different contexts in ways that reinforce the depiction of Afghanistan as dangerous, volatile, etc. (and the UK as not so). I acknowledge the complicity of the UK, and other countries, in creating the conditions that have given rise to this violence. I also acknowledge the depth of structural and cultural violence that persists in the UK. My aim here is to present my feelings of anxiety, anger and sadness in the face of how ongoing direct violence is disproportionately affecting the people of Afghanistan.

[6] This autoethnographic entry has originated from reflections during Ph.D. fieldwork.

[7] www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

[8] This autoethnographic entry refers to data gathered with eight teachers and four children as part of a Master's project (Kurian, 2020).

[9] This autoethnographic piece reflects on the researcher's fieldwork in 2017 in Jordan.

[10] This autoethnographic entry has originated from reflections on two different research projects. The first was part of fieldwork for a Master's thesis, the second is connected to Ph.D. research.

[11] Our forthcoming paper (Salem *et al*., forthcoming) examines how our positionality and multidimensional selves may be carried more ethically across diverse contexts of research and relatedness to participants.

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